HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
Historic Landmark Case No. 12-07

Spingarn Senior High School
2500 Benning Road NE
Part of Parcel 160/45

Meeting Date:	November 29, 2012
Applicant:	Kingman Park Civic Association
Affected ANC:	5B
Staff Reviewer:	Tim Dennee

After careful consideration, the Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate Spingarn Senior High School, 2500 Benning Road NE, a historic landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. The staff further recommends that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places with a recommendation for listing at the local level.

Background and significance
Spingarn High School was built in 1951-1952, as a school for African American students. It was erected to relieve the overcrowding of the other segregated high schools and had been planned for the purpose since the late 1930s, even before the death of its namesake, educator and literary critic Joel Elias Spingarn, one of the first Jewish leaders of the NAACP (and also namesake of the organization's Spingarn Medal for outstanding achievement). Engineer and civic leader Howard D. Woodson was among those who championed the construction of a new school at the Benning Road/26th Street site, stressing the importance of incorporating vocational education there in a 1938 letter to the *Washington Post*. The District had opened both Wilson High School and Anacostia Junior-Senior High Schools to white students in the 1930s, after a long hiatus of high school construction.

Material shortages because of World War II and the Korean War had a lot to do with construction delays, but it may have been the desegregation lawsuits of the late 1940s and early 1950s that prodded the District to finally construct the building as a half measure to satisfy African American residents. But it was only two years after the school opened that the process of desegregation began. Spingarn was thus the last "black" high school, as it was also the first one built in a quarter century. Its opening then, was a major event, drawing not only the Spingarn family but such luminaries as W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson and John Hope Franklin.

The deferral of construction is probably responsible for the fact that Spingarn is also the last of the Classical Revival and Colonial Revival schools. After the war and under the direction of Municipal Architect Merrel Coe, the District turned to a more functionalist, modern vocabulary, although the idea of a central entrance pavilion and portico was carried on in a schematic fashion in many of the modern schools of the 1940s and 1950s. Here, although fairly flattened, we have a truly classical, pedimented portico superimposed on a shallowly projecting pavilion, all over a

rusticated base and fronting a strictly symmetrical plan. Jack-arch window lintels are limited to this central pavilion; the rest of the punched openings lack detail. This project was one of the last products of the Office of the Municipal Architect, established in 1909, and also one of Merrel Coe's last schools, at least as the superintendent of its construction. Stylistically, the building better represents the design work of Coe's predecessor, the Beaux-Arts-trained Nathan Wyeth.

The nomination is not strong on the description of the property, nor in discussing the evolution of it physically or historically. It does, however, stress the principal points of the property's significance, which include not only those above, but also the fact that Spingarn can be seen as the completion of an educational campus for African Americans envisioned in the 1930s, to include all levels of elementary and secondary education, in some ways similar to the cluster of formerly African American schools along First Street NW between L and P Streets, but more campus-like. Spingarn occupies the same parcel as Hugh M. Browne Junior High School (1932), Phelps Vocational School (1934) and Charles Young Public School (1937). The anachronistic classicism of Spingarn is appropriate as it relates to its older siblings. This campus is a piece of a larger parcel of formerly federal land (partly land reclaimed from the Anacostia River) that was developed as an African American neighborhood including Langston Terrace Dwellings and Langston Golf Course. In fact, the educational campus in its entirety would appropriately be a single landmark or a historic district—and possibly a district in combination with the surrounding African American landmark properties and the adjoining Kingman Park neighborhood, which was developed with African American purchasers in mind.

Of course, most important is the educational school's function. But schools also play a role as a neighborhood meeting place and visual landmark. High schools have an importance that transcends a single neighborhood, and by virtue of their size, prominence and relatively small number, they are that much more important as visual and social landmarks.

Less important is the relationship with Joel Spingarn. This is only because, like most public buildings, the high school was named to honor Spingarn posthumously, but he had no particular association with the site. Properties may be designated for an association with important individuals, but only when those individuals occupied or used the sites.

For the reasons stated above, Spingarn Senior High School is eligible for designation as a District of Columbia landmark and for listing in the National Register of Historic Places for being "associated with historical periods, social movements, groups, institutions, achievements, or patterns of growth and change that contributed to the heritage, culture or development of the District of Columbia…" ("History", D.C. Criterion B and National Register Criterion A) and for "embody[ing] the distinguishing characteristics of" and architectural style and building type ("Architecture and Urbanism", D.C. Criterion D and National Register Criterion C). As a specific type of school, Spingarn is eligible under the multiple-property document *Public School Buildings of Washington, 1862-1960*, but as a belatedly realized example of Municipal Architect Nathan Wyeth's design work, rather than representative of Merrel Coe and the architecture of the period 1946-1954.

Integrity

The property retains high integrity, with little change to the massive block and two interior courtyards. The only additions are a small extension of the rear boiler room and a "greenhouse" pavilion on the south side. The building retains its large, central auditorium and gymnasium, although the interior of most spaces contain changes to finishes one expects to find in a school more than half a century old. Also as one might expect, all the windows and doors have been replaced, with products that do not match the original configurations and materials, and there are numerous window air-conditioning units. As for the grounds, there is modern fencing, as well as a small outbuilding, some accessibility ramps, and additional paving. Across 26th Street are a modern football field and additional parking. The property retains its integrity of location, setting, workmanship, feeling and association, and with the exception of the alterations mentioned above, of materials and design.

Period of significance

The nomination proposes as the landmark's period of significance the years 1952 to the present, the former year being the date the building was completed. While there is certainly truth to saying that a school's significance continues with its use—and indeed, that history in general does not end—a designation requires us to set some sort of termination to a period that we are to consider historic, as distinct from the present. There are a couple of reasons for this. First, enough time has to have elapsed so that we can judge a property and its story within its historical context. The nearer we get to the present, it is more difficult to be able to step back and evaluate it and to understand the broader context of the evolving society around it. Second, buildings, too, evolve with use, seeing additions and alterations. We have to decide which physical aspects are most important to protect; we must decide on some essential identity of the property. If all eras are equal, then any present or future change is equally significant as well, and there is little point in trying to protect any particular aspect of a property. Having a terminal date in the past provides practical guidance on how to treat a building, helping answer such questions as, what type of windows should we use today? And, can a particular addition be demolished or altered?

As history does not end (or at least has not yet ended), the terminal date of a period of significance is often somewhat arbitrary, although we often try to select a date that corresponds to some event relative to the property. The National Register's rule of thumb is that 50 years old is when most buildings might first be evaluated for significance or be may be considered to be significant. (Still, buildings of apparent exceptional significance might be designated when younger.) For this reason, the terminal date for a property's period of significance is often set at 50 years prior to the date of their designation.

For properties important for more than architecture, the period of significance is typically longer than a single construction year, to capture a sense of their history of use. As the story of Spingarn is tied up with the history of the racial segregation of public facilities, is it crucial to include the entire 1950s, the period of desegregation and of the consolidation and reorganization of the formerly dual school systems. A date of 1962, 50 years ago, would capture this era, and also coincide with the attendance of some of the school's most illustrious graduates, such as Elgin Baylor and Dave Bing. It is also predates the school's nondescript additions and roughly coincides with the terminal date of the survey and multiple-property document *Public School Buildings of Washington, 1862-1960*.